**Transition to Self Rule**

While still in the midst of the Revolutionary War, it became obvious that--even with General Washington leading the young nation's military forces--a national government was needed to coordinate the war effort. The Continental Congress which had declared the nation's independence and propelled it into war against Britain did not have the ability to unify and lead the nation. Acting to create a government which allowed the thirteen states to work together well enough to win the war, the Congress passed the [Articles of Confederation](http://www.thisnation.com/library/articles.html) in 1777. It was not until 1781, however, that it was adopted by all 13 colonies.

The Declaration of Independence and the severing of ties with the British crown pushed the new nation perilously close to a return to the "[state of nature](http://www.thisnation.com/textbook/whygovt-philosophy.html)." While there were established governments in the several states, there was no governmental entity capable of uniting the states. While liberty was the aim of the Revolution, some semblance of order was needed to win the war. While the Articles were sufficient to guide the new nation through its war for independence, as soon as the war was concluded, indications that it would not serve the new nation in peacetime appeared almost immediately. After the fighting had ceased, General Washington had to convince several high ranking officers not to rebel against the Confederal Congress because of its failures to keep promises to the Revolutionary Army. While Washington's intervention probably saved the new nation from plummeting into chaos, it only postponed the larger question of how the nation would govern itself after the war.

With the end of the war, however, came a sense of relief and perhaps even complacency. For a time, the Articles were considered sufficient to unite the independent states enough to meet their collective needs.

In 1785 and 1786, however, a series of events transpired which exposed the underlying weaknesses of the Articles (see the list on the right). As the nation struggled to get back on its feet economically after the war, it faced growing difficulties in dealing with Britain as it delayed its withdrawal from forts and harbors in America and imposed high tariffs on goods exported from America to England. These problems were made worse by the absence of a single spokesman to represent the nation's trade interests abroad. While John Adams had been dispatched as an Ambassador to Britain, in practice, each state acted on its own, entering into agreements with Britain and other nations and undermining the nation's unity.

On the home front, a large number of Revolutionary War veterans, many of whom had returned to their farms after the war, were falling behind in their payments on their homes and land. Sporadic conflicts arose between bankers and land owners as homes were foreclosed and debtors were sent to jail for failure to pay their debts. Violence over such actions erupted in at least six states with armed bands of farmers breaking up bankruptcy proceedings and letting people out of debtors prisons. This was a troubling turn of events for the young nation, all the more so because many of the people behind the violence were the same people who had fought the Revolutionary War!\

**Weaknesses of the** [**Articles of Confederation**](http://www.thisnation.com/library/articles.html)

Under the Articles, the national government was very limited. This made it weak, even impotent, in times of crisis. Among other things, the Articles:

* Did not provide for an executive branch. The Congress had to act as both the legislature and the executive.
* Did not empower the Congress to tax the states to raise money for the nation's army or navy or to pay its war debts. Funds could only be "requested" from the states.
* Provided no authority for regulating commerce and trade in the states. States issued their own currencies, taxed each other's goods and entered into competing trade agreements with other nations. There were isolated incidents of violence at state borders when merchants tried to take products from one state to another. The Congress could do nothing in response.
* Failed to establish a national judiciary that could resolve disputes between states and between states and the national government. State courts had the ability to overturn national laws.

As growing numbers of farmers faced the possibility of losing their homes and land, they urged their state governments to issue new paper currency with which the farmers could pay their debts. The devalued currency would obviously be meaningless to creditors who strongly opposed such measures. In Rhode Island, the state government gave into the demands of the farmers after the Commerce Party defeated the Country Party in statewide elections. Paper money was printed and creditors, not debtors, were threatened with imprisonment. Thereafter, residents of other states often referred to Rhode Island as "Rogue Island."

While all of these events were troubling, the episode which most directly contributed to the growing perception that the national government was too weak was Shay's Rebellion. In 1786, Daniel Shays, a former Revolutionary War officer, led a band of farmers intent on overthrowing the state government of Massachusetts. They began throwing judges out of courtrooms and freeing debtors from jail. In response, the Confederal Congress immediately called for $530,000 from the states to put down the rebellion. Lacking the authority to compel the states to pay taxes, however, doomed the effort--all but Virginia refused to pay. With very limited funds, only 65 of the "most raggedly rascals you ever beheld" could be assembled to face the rebels. In the face of impending disaster, the merchants and bankers, at the call of the governor of Massachusetts, assembled their own militia and crushed the rebellion.

While Shay's Rebellion did not seriously threaten the stability or government of the nation, it sent a clear message that the national government established by the Articles of Confederation did not provide enough order for the states and the people who lived therein to fully enjoy their liberties. The Confederal Congress, responding to the sentiments generated by the incident, authorized a convention for the "sole and express purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation." Each state was to appoint delegates to attend the convention in May of 1787 to continue in America's search for a system of government that could balance liberty and order in an acceptable manner.